

# “I was Born in a Small Town”

Separating Myth from Reality in Heartland America

A Senior Honors Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for graduation with  
research distinction in Sociology in the undergraduate colleges of The  
Ohio State University

by

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March, 2009

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## Introduction

Noted Hoosier John Mellencamp may have said it first, but I really am from the heartland he canonized. I am from Pickaway County, Ohio, where the outstretched fingers of Columbus touch the borderlands of Appalachia, though I remain unsure if I am truly *of* there. After seven years of attending Teays Valley Local Schools, I began an odyssey at Wellington, a private prep school in Columbus that would in turn lead me to an undergraduate career at Ohio State and a future in law school. For a farm boy from Pickaway County, such a course is the height of unusual. From the moment I changed schools, I forever became the odd man out. At Wellington I was a cultural curiosity straight out of TV. Seemingly until the day I graduated I provided responses like, “Yes we have cows. No we do not milk them. Yes...we have cable.” While it was weird in high school that I showed steers, I was weird at the steer show for going to private school in Columbus. Despite having six generations of Pickaway County farm heritage and scratches on my tanned arms from baling hay, I never fit in the local scene. I can instinctively throw a little twang in my voice, but it’s not my go-to form of communication and I constantly worry that someone will figure it out and call me on it. It is my social confusion that has driven me to navigate the differences between small town myth and small town reality, hoping to find out something about myself along the way.

From the foundation of the American republic, intellectuals and politicians have debated the ideal qualities of a republican citizen. Many of these discussions, from Thomas Jefferson’s ideal yeoman farmer to Sarah Palin’s espousal of small town values, have revolved around the

supposed qualities of rural Americans. The problem with debating American values is that they are shrouded in mythology. It is extremely difficult to separate oneself from prejudices concerning the nature of one's countrymen, and even more difficult to filter out society's constant bombardment of idealized values. In *Habits of the Heart*, the authors try to find the soul of Middle America through a large collection of personal interviews with a focus on traditional American values. Though an impressive portrait is painted, *Habits* largely neglects rural America, dismissing small town values as mythology surviving only as nostalgia for a bygone era. This assumption leaves untouched a critically important element of America's social conscious which, though obscured by mythology, remains of primary importance to millions of Americans.

To properly understand small town values, one must disentangle the myth from the complicated reality. It is critical, however, not to simply discard the myth but to appreciate the truths from which it grew and purpose it serves. For many people, including those who live in rural areas, the small town myth is a reality important not because of its accuracy but for the meaning attributed it. Across America and in Pickaway County, expanding cities and shifting populations have made the small town is a threatened institution, but not a dead one. Rural communities built around agriculture, local business, and county fairs still exist, if not in the numbers they once did, and for many of the people who live in them they represent a bastion of security and comfort. In this study I have interviewed people who live and work in a rural community to examine their perspectives as parents, farmers, teachers, community leaders, and advocates for their community. The insights they have provided help to illustrate the unique cultural aspects of a rural area in ways that statistics cannot. Living in places like Ashville

and Circleville, they function in ways that are similar to urbanites in many respects, but in others quite unique. The small town and its values are not extinct, but are struggling to survive against the change around them while maintaining some of the elusive values that have attracted thinkers for over two hundred years.

## **Literature**

In 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville made the journey from France to the United States to study the workings of the young American republic. His subsequent work *Democracy in America* remains a must-read for students of culture and political science, detailing not only the machinations of government, but the qualities inherent in the people he encountered. Many of Tocqueville's findings still represent core American ideals. Tocqueville emphasized the importance of America's strong local communities in forging social bonds, "Local freedom... perpetually brings men together, and forces them to help one another, in spite of the propensities which sever them," (Tocqueville, 470). Local communities in a free society serve as a counter to self-interested individualism, which Tocqueville felt would lead to a despotic tyranny of individuals. Though he was concerned about the overdevelopment of individual power, Tocqueville felt that the social bonds of the community would allow individuals to also use their talents to contribute to the public welfare.

The authors of *Habits of the Heart* draw heavily on Tocqueville in their study of American values through an extensive collection of interview data, even drawing the book's title from his writing on social mores. The book reveals how America has dramatically changed since the 1830's while still holding many of the same values. One of the most oft-cited interviewees,

Brian Palmer, exemplifies the emphasis most Americans place on self-reliance, “I guess self-reliance is one of the characteristics I have pretty high up in my value system. It was second nature,” (Bellah, 4). Palmer is certainly mainstream in his belief that people should be self-reliant, exhibiting this value through his commitment to climbing the corporate ladder and securing financial success. Though Palmer admits he has since redefined his values to favor family, he still talks about it as his personal priority. Like virtually all of the other people cited in *Habits*, Palmer utilizes, “a common moral vocabulary, which we propose to call the ‘first language’ of American individualism,” (Bellah, 22). The authors argue that the culture of American individualism dominates societal discourse so that even articulate people have difficulty defining their values as anything but personal choices or prerogatives. Naturally, this difficulty extends to the intersection between public and private life, as individuals try to reconcile their interests with those of the larger community.

*Habits* features one small town resident, Joe Gorman of Suffolk, Massachusetts. In his town of fewer than 20,000 residents near Boston, Joe typifies what many people’s images of a small town resident may be. He works for a local manufacturer, organizes community events, and idealizes his small town. The authors paint an image of Gorman as a tragic figure, nostalgically longing for an unrealistic return to the Suffolk of old as he subjectively views it, (Bellah, 12). It would be impossible to turn back the clock to a bygone era of small town dominance.

The traditional importance of the small town in American life is discussed at length in the book, with Gorman serving as a real life example. Towns in the time of Tocqueville are

evoked as egalitarian ethics of local communities served to balance the spirit of competitive individualism with citizenship, “anchored in the ethos and institutions of the face-to-face community of the town,” (Bellah, 39). Small towns lost their dominance, however, with the onset of the industrial revolution, during which the old idea of citizenship focused on the town was called into question. A new society began to emerge with only a small number of Americans living and working in small towns and the majority of the population living in cities where people were compartmentalized, (Bellah, 42,22). In today’s world, the authors suggest that the small town has become a traditional mythology rather than a true way of life. The symbol of the town has become powerful,

*“the profound yearning for the idealized small town that we found among most of the people we talked to is a yearning for just such meaning and coherence...the yearning for the small town is nostalgia for the irretrievably lost,”(Bellah, 282-283).*

Such as statement is bold, declaring that the small town is a dead institution, existing today only in myth and ideal. The argument reflects upon the view of President Reagan that modern community participation is a voluntary activity, and that Tocqueville’s republican citizen has been transformed into an economic man, (Bellah, 263, 271). Though the authors acknowledge that small town ideas can still be a powerful force, they give little credit to the actions of people like Joe Gorman who strive to recover the small town. To do so I feel is to overlook the fact that many people still populate America’s small towns and that these people remain the reality within the mythology. Without these people, the mythology would scarcely exist.

In his article *Community Worldviews and Rural Systems*, Jemel Curry makes a critical point about rural communities while assessing the effects of religious traditions on worldviews. Most relevantly, Curry argues that culture and ideology are at least as important as socioeconomic forces in understanding rural societies. He cites Miller's assertion that "beliefs often provide the key to understanding institutional structures and collective social action," (Curry, 695). Curry develops this idea through studying five towns with populations under 3,000 in Iowa. Though the towns had similar economic situations, their residents responded differently to questions designed to test community bonds such as what to do when selling a farm for development may threaten the prosperity of one's neighbors. Curry illustrates rural communities that at first blush seem alike but whose residents may exhibit different values based on their town's religious and cultural traditions. All rural communities are not the same, and so there is no universal set of small town values much as no two individuals share precisely the same values. Curry's work also shows that small towns do indeed have distinct values, not to be understood as only mythology.

In his book *Deer Hunting with Jesus*, Joe Bageant writes about his hometown of Winchester, Virginia, located in the heart of Appalachia. Bageant provides a vivid portrayal of working class whites using stories about his friends, family, and neighbors to feature a group that is often forgotten. *Deer Hunting* addresses several issues that are fundamental to understanding Appalachian culture including education, economic circumstances, and political views. Repeatedly, Bageant underscores the type of economic hardship faced by,

*“working people both young and old—mostly whites with only a high school diploma... who in 2005 were still trying to crack \$35,000 and who still make up 24 percent of American workers,” (Bageant, 8-9).*

It is these people who toil in low paying jobs at Home Depot or Wal-Mart, and whose lives are devastated by the layoffs at a local factory. These are the unseen in American society, and Bageant points out that as of 2005 poor whites were the only demographic group in America that was both growing in number and sliding deeper into poverty, (Bageant, 9). Developments in the national economy have only hurt this group, as jobs in manufacturing and other sectors have disappeared to be replaced only by menial, low-paying service industry jobs. In Winchester, Bageant tells the stories of people he knows living paycheck to paycheck whose lives were crippled by medical bills or mounting housing payments due to ill-advised mortgages. Despite these difficulties, Winchester is a growing area, although only a few well-positioned locals benefit from “superheated overdevelopment” while the rest of the tax base is left to foot the bill for new schools and infrastructure, (Bageant, 41).

Economic conditions aside, Winchester leans politically Republican as most people “vote for the man who looks strong enough to keep housing values up, to destroy your unseen enemies abroad, and to give God a voice,” (Bageant, 8). This view of rural conservatism is in stark contrast to the image held by many of the gun-toting, hippie-hating, ignorant redneck. It is a more sympathetic depiction of people seeking to be secure in their choice of political leaders. Bageant’s Winchester is a town held back by its circumstances in ways that clearly



resemble many of those found in Circleville, a town with Appalachian roots that has fallen on hard times.

Unlike in *Habits of the Heart*, which portrays an American society where individualism has prevailed, small communities have not died. Bellah et al are wrong to portray Joe Gorman as a figure longing for a lost past, there are Gormans all over America who live and work in small towns while their way of life struggles to persist. People in small towns are able to voice their feelings through language that does not only focus on themselves, but in ways that emphasize the welfare and strength of their community outside of the individual. Though *Habits* may be correct in asserting that Americans often lack the language to speak in terms of the community, the underlying feelings can still be easily understood as tied to the public good. The America that Tocqueville describes in the 1830's has not vanished, as rural people still form strong community bonds that draw them to share their talents and balance individual interests with the public good.

### **Pickaway County-Overview**

Pickaway County does not stand out as particularly significant. The Circleville Pumpkin Show, billed as the "Greatest Free Show on Earth", is the county's only truly unique attraction and it only lasts for one week of the year. Though it attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors annually, only so much can be gleaned from a festival dedicated to producing massive squash. The area is best understood as a cultural crossroads, where the Appalachians meet Columbus, the fifteenth largest city in America, (Census Annual Estimates). In the northern part of the county, where my family has farmed for six generations, the city's outer belt is a scant five miles

to the north and commercial development is rapidly expanding southward into Pickaway. In the south, the orientation is less toward Columbus than it is aimed at Chillicothe, an Appalachian city in Ross County. In the middle lies Circleville, a small city which has suffered a tremendous loss of manufacturing jobs in recent years and is struggling to survive. Ashville and its neighbor South Bloomfield, villages located roughly halfway between my parents' house and Circleville, are rapidly growing residential communities with little commercial development to speak of. The remainder of the county is flat-as-a-pancake farmland dotted with a few small hamlets.

Demographically, the area could not be more stereotypical. According to Census data, in 2006 the population was 93.1% white with 5.1% African-American, (Census Quick Facts). Honestly, I thought the percentage of blacks was surprisingly high, when I attended Teays Valley I knew of only one black student in the entire district. Once in middle school when I had a black friend over to visit, my father joked to him that most of the locals had never seen a black person before. He was only half joking. It is in this area that I grew up, and also where I conducted interviews with residents.

### **Rural Mythology vs. Rural Reality**

Pickaway County has always been an area dominated by agriculture. It looks like the kind of place where Jefferson envisioned the independent farmer who was actively participating in common life, (Bellah, 30). Going back six generations, my family has farmed the same land after moving to Ohio from Maryland and purchasing the land from the federal government during westward expansion. Our original deed bears the signature of then Secretary of State and acclaimed federalist James Madison and my grandmother lives in an elegant brick house

finished by one of my ancestors shortly following the Civil War. It was Madison, coincidentally, who wrote in the federalist papers that public virtues are essential to the survival of a democracy (Bellah, 254-255). Such homes as my grandmother's are not uncommon and family ties as old as mine can be found without much difficulty. Indeed, one of my interviewees lives on land his family purchased from the government in 1803 and in a house built in 1815. Although he is a retired engineer, the farm is still in operation in cooperation with a full time farmer and he plans to keep the 227 acre spread in the family. The sense of continuity was clearly important to him, as he spun yarns about his predecessors and said, "here I am continuing what they started." Farming is undoubtedly a family business, and in a community full of farmers, people are generally in touch with their roots.

Visit Pickaway County and you will see mile after mile of fields filled with corn and soybeans. The vast majority of acreage is dedicated to commodity grain farming, the ancient art of coaxing food from the soil that has evolved into a technological marvel integrating Ohio farmers into the global economy. In this structure, most of the grain is purchased by large corporations that dominate the market and exert heavy influence over pricing. Cargill, the world's largest privately held company, and Archer Daniels Midland together buy about a third of the corn grown in the US each year, (Pollan, 63). Farmers are usually forced to accept the prices offered by these companies for grain, as there are so few buyers. My father drives semi loads of corn as far as Cincinnati to make a few extra nickels per bushel, but that is one of only three or four possible destinations for our farm's grain.

Farmers possess an acute understanding of this system. One I farmer interviewed said, “Farmers are price takers not price makers,” and cited an example of his father saying they had lost \$100,000 when commodity markets fell due to President Carter’s 1979 grain embargo. He continued along this line of reasoning to justify government subsidies for farmers that keep them afloat in lean years, “If we didn’t have subsidies, I don’t know who would still be farming.” Indeed, the prices paid to farmers for their goods often don’t come close to their inputs. In 2005, Iowa farmers received only \$1.45 per bushel of corn that cost them \$2.50 per bushel to grow, (Pollan, 53). One way to make up this shortfall is through government payments that since the 1970’s have rewarded farmers for maximizing their production, making growing more the name of the game for grain farmers in the US, (Pollan, 54). In 1919, one quarter of the US population was farmers, with one able to feed twelve Americans. Today, there are fewer than two million farmers, which is one for every 129, making American farmers the most productive people in human history, (Pollan, 34). A farmer told me of his grandfather once bragging to him about a corn crop yielding 80 bushels per acre, which today would be a disaster, requiring crop insurance payments. Today he averages 150 or 160 bushels per acre, and in the last few years farmers have passed the 200 bushel threshold for the first time.

Pickaway County is also home to several dairy farms, but it is a much smaller sub-group than grain farmers. According to the dairy farmer I interviewed, their group is more closely bonded in some ways than grain farmers, probably because of their small numbers. There is “a common bond as a group,” among dairy farmers and they often work to help one another. On one occasion when three of them needed to buy new skid loaders, they went to the company together to get a better price. Neither my background in grain farming nor any of the

interviews I conducted suggest this kind of bond among grain farmers. Though grain farmers make friends through common organizations and shared interests they do not demonstrate this level of closeness. Dairy is also different from grain in that it has perhaps not changed as dramatically. Though dairy technology has progressed with electric milking machines and storage, dairy still requires a great deal of hands on work with animals. Much like the grain farm though, the dairy farmer I spoke to said, "I hope that it continues to be a farm," and though she has no children hoped that a friend or another relative could eventually take over the operation to keep it in dairy.

Farming has changed dramatically over the last several decades, and farmers have increasingly had to develop new skills to meet technological and business challenges. One farmer said, "You can't be dumb and be a farmer nowadays. You've got to be a chemist, you've got to be an economist, you've got to know your agriculture, you've got to be a banker...that was a learning experience." Two of the farmers I interviewed have college degrees in agriculture. They may be the same people who have toiled tilling the earth for generations, but they are playing a much different game than their forefathers. The practice of farming has changed forever, abandoning the myth of the man and his small patch of ground representing true self-sufficiency. Farmers do not even eat most of the food they grow. The modern myth that farming is dominated by corporations is also false, as only "4 percent of farms are incorporated and most of these are family-held corporations," (Lobao, 13). Most farms are family owned, mostly either as large operations or small part-time operations. In my area there is some of each.

The Jeffersonian ideal, however, is not dead as farming remains more of a lifestyle than an occupation, and farmers remain active, integral members of their communities. Today, “about one-fifth of American counties depend on farming,” which pumps money into local businesses and banks while also creating niche businesses in chemicals, seed, trucking and other areas, (Lobao, 18). Farmers are also community actors on the individual level. My father, for example, is a township trustee and his father and brother were both school board members. The dairy farmer I interviewed doubles as a public attorney. Farming remains a family enterprise, with parents teaching children both the profession and the way of life so that another generation can continue the family legacy. Considering the lifestyle of agriculture, the myth of the yeoman farmer turns out to be more reality than fiction.

Of Pickaway County’s roughly 53,000 residents, about a fifth live in the county seat of Circleville (Pickaway Progress). It’s not the smallest of towns, but not the biggest either. Adhering to Midwestern tradition, the tallest building is the Cargill grain elevator. Besides being the political center, the town is home to the Pumpkin Show, the county fair, and most of the area’s non-farm employment. One woman from a farm family remarked how when she was growing up,

*“The power base was really the farmers, they were the wealthiest, we didn’t have the equipment we have now so you had lots of people that worked for you, and that’s all changed. Industry came in, that changed it.”*

Over the last few decades, most non-farm jobs were in local plants such as Dupont and Thompson RCA. Recently, many of these jobs have left town due to economic pressures. One

of the people I spoke to had previously worked at a plant that has since shifted its production to Mexico, leaving many unemployed or unable to find a job as well paying as those at the plant. When Wal-Mart declared a need for lower prices, RCA was forced to comply by shutting down facilities and laying off workers in a decision that including cutting the Circleville plant in 2003. This move cost the city an estimated 1000 jobs and prompted a feature on the PBS show "Frontline." In the bitterest twist of irony, Wal-Mart then vacated its previous building across US Route 23 to a new "Super Center" location next door to the now dormant RCA plant. There were new jobs created by Wal-Mart, but not nearly enough to replace, "the \$15 to \$16 an hour workers made at Thomson, and a far cry from the pension, health care, and job security benefits that have long been the norm in manufacturing," (PBS). Speaking about Circleville's plight, one Ashville resident said, "They lost a lot when they lost Thompson. They lost a lot of jobs and they lost millions of dollars in financing." Though this is the most poignant example of job loss in Circleville, it is not that unusual. Census data shows that in 2005 non-farm countywide employment stood at 11,070, down a staggering 8.7% from 2000. This was more than twice the job loss rate in Ohio over the same period, (Census Quick Facts). According to a Needs Assessment conducted by the Pickaway County Family and Children First Council, 2,150 jobs were lost over this period related to local plant closures, and the poverty level rose from 10.6 to 17.5 percent, (Family and Children, 8). The job losses have clearly had severe effects on the community. Within Circleville City Schools, 33.7 percent of children come from families designated economically disadvantaged, creating an enormous strain on the educational system (Family and Children).

Small towns nationally are feeling the same pinch. Bageant writes that Rubbermaid, a Wooster, Ohio company with a plant in Winchester, Virginia, was similarly bullied by Wal-Mart into lowering its prices. Out of options and, "after seeing its sales drop 30 percent... Rubbermaid has shut down sixty-

nine of its four hundred facilities and fired eleven thousand workers,” (Bageant, 74-76). Ideals of loyalty from large corporations to their employees and communities have been lost in rural areas as much as urban ones. The loss of manufacturing jobs is a national problem, as areas try to replace lost jobs and develop new solutions.

Pickaway County is entering a new transition period much like the one described above from dominance of farming to manufacturing. The same woman described the future best, “I don’t think you can dream about bringing in plants like Dupont and GE, I think those days are over.” This sentiment was shared by all interviewees posed the question, that the era of the factory in Circleville providing jobs is over. The agricultural economic base persists, but farming cannot be looked to as an opportunity for increased employment. Numbers of farmers are stagnant or falling, as there is only so much land to till and farmers are expanding their acreage to stay in business. The reality is that to survive Pickaway County is being forced to adapt to its situation, a move that may threaten its small town sanctity.

Ashville is the northernmost town of significance, and as the closest municipality to Columbus it feels change most. Beginning in the late 1990’s, Ashville began experiencing a housing boom due to its lower cost of living and proximity to the city (about 10 miles from the I-270 outer belt). One resident, who has lived in Ashville for 22 years, describes the relationship between Ashville and Columbus,

*“They are growing closer together. I still think we have a little bit of that buffer...there is still some space, but not much. I don’t see that buffer being there for much longer.*



*Culturally we are getting some of the influence... We like the idea of the small town feel...  
And a lot of the small town feel is going away."*

The influence she is talking about is the change of people moving from Columbus to Ashville, and the building of new housing developments on the northern end of town.

Perhaps the greatest change created by this influence is in the Teays Valley Local School District. In 1999, one of the reasons my parents shifted my brothers and I to private school was the overcrowding at Teays. Since I left, the district has passed a levy with matching state funds to renovate the high school and build three new elementary schools with more construction on the way. The resident I spoke to has two children in the district, and she mentioned a new middle school currently being built to accommodate the growing numbers in the elementary schools. At this point, Teays Valley is by far the largest of the four county schools systems with an enrollment of over 3300 and growing, (Family and Children, 10).

I spoke with an old teacher of mine at Teays Valley who has worked there for sixteen years and as an educator for thirty. She said that from a student's perspective, some of them have expressed to her that, "Now the classes are so big, they don't feel like they know each other as well," as graduating class sizes have ballooned from a little over 100 to close to 500. Concerning the population, she feels that there are now more teachers from outside the area, which provides new important new perspectives, but she laments that the student population, "is still pretty white bread...I think that's a real shame for our kids." She commented on the influx of new residents into the community and students into the schools,

*“When these people move out of the big city, a lot of them come to avoid the problems they would find in the big city. But they bring those problems with them then. We are going to have a whole new set of challenges that perhaps we never had before, typical of a big city, and I worry about that. I think it will lose a lot of that small town kind of flavor.”*

It is that small town flavor that many people in the area cherish and that is often symbolized through the school. People identify with an institution that has shaped their lives and those of nearly everyone they know, and even the superintendent is a local who has a great passion for the school. I went to elementary school in the same building as my father, and his three siblings, and his father before them. It was an emotional separation to remove my brothers and me from a setting that was familiar to generations of Peters, and a difficult sell for some who could understand the academic reasoning but struggled with the cultural implications. Such ties are common in a rural area where people are unified by the school whether it is by attending class or rooting the football team to the state playoffs.

Despite many of the demographic and cultural changes affecting the schools, some things have not changed. Though the school ranks as the best in the county in scores on the Ohio Graduation Test, this is a limited measure that if anything underscores the poor quality of the county schools. The teacher said that, “All we do is prep those kids for that doggone test,” a refrain likely familiar to public school teachers across the state. She feels that students are not truly challenged to prepare them for college, and that AP scores are usually very weak. Returning Teays alumni comment on their ill-preparedness for college, especially in the crucial

areas of math and science. There is no initiative from the administration to improve these standards, because the goal is to meet mediocre state requirements. The public schools are reciprocating existing conditions, with only 11.4 percent of county residents over the age of 25 possessing a bachelor's degree or higher level of education, roughly half the state and national averages, (Family and Children, 13). For these reasons, one of my interviewees chose to make the same decision my family did by one of his children to a Catholic school in Lancaster even though he was a Circleville High School graduate. He called it an, "absolute sin" and an "embarrassment" that Circleville has so many students that cannot pass proficiency tests. His wife cited a moment when her oldest daughter came back from college and felt she was underprepared compared to her fellow students, prompting them to present their younger daughter with the option to switch schools. She also mentioned new initiatives in the County to improve access to education that she has experienced as a social worker. These programs are already starting to have a positive impact by giving kids a greater opportunity to attend college. To improve its situation, Pickaway County will undoubtedly have to embrace such programs and create a better educated workforce.

Harrison Township, which encompasses Ashville and the area to its north, is not only facing rapid demographic changes but economic changes as well. Development has been spurred by nearby Rickenbacker Airport, which is home to commercial shipping and the National Guard. A series of warehouses have been built in Franklin County near the airport, and now the development has spread to Pickaway County with the construction of a new intermodal for the movement of goods by rail, air, and truck. The construction personally touched me when I pulled into my parents' driveway one night in the spring of 2008 to see

lights across the fields to the east. It looked like the Martians had landed on the other side of our corn fields as the night sky was bathed in yellow by the spires of light coming from the intermodal.

I spoke with a local official who has lived in Ashville for about fifty years and worked as a firefighter for much of his life, giving him a unique perspective on the changes that have already occurred and those that are impending. Currently, lack of capital due to the national economic crisis has slowed development, but he is confident that it will ramp up again as soon as the funds become available. He foresees the township greatly benefitting from development, with property tax revenues increasing and many jobs,

*“At one time they had predicted that once it was under full operation...there would be somewhere around 70,000 jobs, that’s what you want...It’s the people, the wages, they’re the ones that support the tax base.”*

Such a high number of jobs would undoubtedly be a boon to the area, sending it in the opposite direction of the empty plants in Circleville. A local resident mentions that there is some friction among locals concerning the development and some blame has been inappropriately laid at the feet of local officials, but suggests that the change is inevitable. She said that she expects changes to eventually affect the whole area, and agrees with the official that, “the jobs part of that [development] we will need.” Clearly there are some who resent coming changes as threatening their rural way of life, but many residents accept them as an inevitable result of living so near to a large city.

The village of South Bloomfield, next door to Ashville, has “the opportunity of Berger Hospital building a new hospital, but still we have to get enough people in the community...to justify building the building.” Though reaching the population threshold necessary for a hospital is a long term possibility, that Berger has already purchased the land for a hospital along US Route 23 represents the likelihood of the situation. To me, the idea of a hospital in South Bloomfield is mind-boggling. The village has heretofore been known only as the biggest speed trap in the history of mankind, picking off hapless motorists travelling north and south along the area’s major highway. I remember when a Wendy’s was built in South Bloomfield along my elementary school bus route. Every day we would admire the growing structure and imagine the implications of Jr. Bacon Cheeseburgers in such close proximity to our homes. Since then McDonalds, Bob Evans, a huge gas station and most recently Arby’s have followed Wendy’s, transforming the village into a Mecca for road trippers. The kids on my bus route today probably do not know how good they have it; because when I was young it was Dairy Queen or bust, which usually meant bust.

In the current economic climate, it is hard to tell how fast development will proceed. One Ashville housing development has stalled, and new houses are only being built as they are sold rather than being built in speculation as the early housing areas were. Concerning the intermodal, commercial realtors have told area officials that, “nothing is going to be spec built,” as warehouses, “north of Rickenbacker in the Groveport area...haven’t had any speculators and it’s made it tough for [the developers].” Even so, two new warehouses are in the works for the Harrison Township area, one of which will be 500,000-600,000 square feet in size. It seems that the growth through development is now more a question of when than whether it will happen

at all. Certainly, the local government has put institutional measures into place that will allow it to benefit from growth rather than futilely oppose it. As far as the local official, "I hope that in my lifetime I see something come out of it, but we'll just have to wait and see." Some residents differ with his opinion, as farm fields and homes will undoubtedly be converted into commercial property and parts of Harrison Township will more closely resemble city outskirts than wide-open farmland. The grain farmer who lives near Circleville empathized with this, "I guess it's [the intermodal development] a necessity, but I feel sorry for farm families up in there." These changes may include the building of a road that will threaten my own ancestral home, a fact that sometimes fills me with sadness but at the same time strikes me as utterly unavoidable. The only certainty seems to be that change will come, and what to make of it is up to the residents.

In Circleville, the situation is quite different, but not without hope for improvement. Serious concerns about job loss and the local economy have brought people together seeking to facilitate change within the community. Through my interviews, I met a few people making sincere efforts on behalf of Circleville and the greater county community. One of these people is a community foundation member who told me that,

*"Either something will be done to us...or we are going to have to decide ourselves what we are going to be, and figure out ways that we can make that work. And that means people have to talk to each other and discuss some of these issues that are in some ways very emotional, land use, conservation, all those things."*

I feel that this quotation sums up feelings on change in the county. To say that it will not happen is to deny the inescapable, and there are many who have difficulty facing up to it. For a farmer it is not just about losing a job, it is really about losing a way of life. This is why development and change is such a touchy issue for people in rural areas, even those who are not farmers fear the loss of the small town way of life.

To change requires not just the willingness to accept it but the tools to make it possible. The Pickaway Progress Partnership is an initiative funded by local businesses and non-profits calling itself “A Community Improvement Corporation,” (Pickaway Progress). With the goal of attracting investment and generating growth, the group touts Pickaway County’s affordable land, growing population, access to the intermodal, and has “a rural character and work ethic but has all the comforts of being situated in a large metropolitan area,” (Pickaway Progress). It is ironic that to promote economic growth that may threaten the rural character of the area, that same character is advertised. The county also possesses other resources, most notably the Teays Aquifer, which runs more than the length of the county. I had multiple interviewees who cited this resource as a key for development and one said that “it’s going to be of great value, and will be in the future,” and, “water will bring people back to the Midwest...it will be a real concern in the future.” This natural resource, along with the population, appears to be Pickaway’s main asset.

In an effort to generate new ideas, the aforementioned member of a community foundation initiated a trip to Nebraska with a group of residents to learn about the Nebraska Community Foundation, which uses estate donations to give back to the community in a very

successful strategy. New ideas are essential she said, because “Sometimes the community doesn’t know what’s possible.” Since the trip, there have been a series of meetings with the Unity Committee to bring community members together to learn about and discuss issues. The second of these meetings was a visit to the intermodal facility and, “They had a lot of people turn out for that, a lot of farmers that didn’t understand exactly what that was.” It is an important first step for members of the community to learn about what the future may bring, so that they can prepare and do what’s best for them and the community as a whole. Anyone hoping for change must address the idea that, “There is such a feeling in this community, of heaviness, of ‘it can’t be done,’ or really criticism of things the person has really not tried themselves.” People need to better understand the challenges facing the community so that they can better solve them in ways that will benefit them in the long run because, “We are on the frontier of some real possibilities for this county, if we don’t put all our land in houses and warehouses.”

Some people are actively making this change possible. One community leader, who has retired after a career of working with troubled youth, now works with a local community foundation in Circleville. He established the first fund for the foundation that now has “43 or 44 funds” each with a minimum of 10,000 dollars, and still works with area youth. Recently, he has worked to develop a new local park because, “there are no resources here for family fun” and kids do not have opportunities to get involved with nature. So far, he has “almost singlehandedly” secured grants to upgrade the park, which will include trails through woods, a bird watching complex, and a blacktop trail in an open field. The project will be good for the physical and mental health of children and also, “advantageous for economic development.”



According to the other community leader, only about a year ago did the county get a park commission, which is a step in the right direction to help attract people to live here who have a stake in what goes on in the county.

People in Pickaway County, though they face encroachments on their way of life, are not bound up in modern American individualism like the authors of *Habits of the Heart* suggest. The people I interviewed were largely targeted because they are active community members, and as such exemplify community values. I felt they were best suited to challenge the assertions in *Habits* that Americans lack of language outside that of individualism to express deep feelings about community means that they are driven for individualistic reasons. When talking about the area, I heard the word “we” a lot to describe what the community as a whole needs and must do to fill those needs. One of the community leaders I spoke to describes a conversation she had with the one who developed the park about why they are involved in service,

*“Why do you do what you do?”*

*“You know I’m getting lots of credit for it. It’s not the credit I do this for, I really enjoy giving back. I really enjoy seeing a place where kids can play. It’s not about I need*

*‘Thank you’s,’ it’s about I’m enjoying this.”*

Though he talked about his joy on an individual level in seeing the results of his work, the words of the community leader reveal why he is doing what he does. The fact that he gains so much enjoyment from not just the park but a life of public service shows a dedication to the public good that goes far beyond personal pleasure. This is a stark contrast to the account of Joe

Gorman in *Habits* that he loved the experience of, “a reward he had not consciously worked for,” as evidence of selfish motives in his community work because of a desire for personal recognition, (Bellah, 10) . The dedication to public virtue espoused by the Pickaway County community leaders is what Tocqueville and Madison were writing about when they described the ideal characteristics of the republican citizen necessary for the survival of democracy.

## **Conclusion**

Culturally, many of the residents of Pickaway County maintain their small-town Appalachian roots. Some of the small town values expressed to me included modesty about money, self-reliance, and community solidarity. I asked each person I interviewed if they felt that small town values are “real” and different other places. Each one of them responded “yes.” People living in this rural community feel strong ties to it and a connection to a way of life that they feel is different from that of the city. For many of them, this is the reason they choose to live in Pickaway County and why they feel others make the same choice. All acknowledged that it is not a perfect place to live, facing economic, social, and educational challenges, but they find it a desirable home. The area, like so many others in Ohio and across America, is in transition. Faced with job-loss due to plant closures, Circleville must revitalize its economy. Ashville, South Bloomfield, and Harrison Township must balance the benefits of development stemming from Columbus with the negative impact such development will have on local agriculture and the makeup of the small town. The small town is an integral part of American traditional culture, and it remains important for millions of Americans as places like Pickaway County struggle to adapt and survive to meet the challenges of today’s world.

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